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Mature women and the EdD: changing identity and family relationships

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Pedagogic Research and Teaching Innovation (PRTI) Award

Final Report 2017

Name of key contact (project leader): Dr Louise Webber

Department: Institute of Education

Names of other staff involved: Dr Nick Pratt, John Hilsdon

Title of project: Mature women and the EdD: changing identity and family relationships

Type of project: Narrative

Keywords: Professional doctorate; women; identity; family, family capital.

Aims of project:

- How do Professional Doctorates (PD) impact on a mature woman's identity and position in family relationships?
- What are the effects of PDs on families as a whole?
- Does the model of family capital, developed with Foundation Degree (FD) women students, help us to understand the experiences of PD students?

Background/context to project:

This project investigated the impact of postgraduate study on mature women students and their families. It built on my previous EdD thesis research with Foundation Degree (FD) students regarding HE study for mature women, identity change and family relationships. My previous findings showed women's identity and confidence changed, this then affected family relationships through a change in roles, changes to childcare approaches, changes in attitude and the perspective of woman students which often rubbed off onto husbands (Webber, 2015). Husbands and children were good producers of family capital and provided capital in the forms of social, economic, cultural and emotional capital. There were three reasons why husbands provided family capital (financial gain, strength of the relationship between husband and wife, and husband previously having experience of HE). This project builds on this research and explores whether these findings are similar for women students on Professional Doctorate (PD) programmes.

Methods used:

Phase one - Mature women and the EdD: changing identity and family relationships –

Qualitative methods of initial mind mapping and focused interviews

- *focused interviews* with 11 women, using a mind mapping technique focusing on the family context and positioning in the family.
- *questionnaire* for 3 students (to further explore the nature of the supervisory relationship in terms of care when students undergo turbulence in their studies or family life - this was an unexpected theme that arose from the findings).

Phase two – Children's perceptions of having a mummy who studies - Qualitative research methods of pictures and focused interviews with children

As there was additional funding left in the budget I decided to explore an aspect of the research that I felt had been neglected: 'children's perceptions of having a mummy who studies'.

- 10 children drew a *picture* of what it 'looks like' to have a mummy that studies.
- *skype interview* with children to talk about their picture followed by a *brief interview* with the mother to explore her perceptions of her child's experiences.

Results:

Phase one - Mature women and the EdD: changing identity and family relationships

1. How do PDs impact on a mature woman's identity and position in family relationships?

Transformations within the home were not as transformative for PD students as FD students as partners and children had already adjusted to the women working away from home or bringing work home so doing the PD was not such a culture shock. They already had high stocks of cultural capital so could build on these. Identity changes were more significant and had a greater impact in the home for FD students compared to PD students. For PD students there was a greater impact on their work and career as their identity changed in the workplace, for some research was not part of their work culture which caused some conflict. Some women struggled and experienced tension and turbulence in other areas (ill health, losing confidence, family tension).

2. What are the effects of PDs on families as a whole?

Undergraduate students	Post graduate students
Identity changes had greater impact on family life	Identity changes had greater impact on work and career
Role changes were more dramatic in the home	Routines were already established because women were more likely to be in full time careers
Friction more likely to be at home than at work	Friction more likely to be at work than at home
Study a culture shock, families saw a greater difference in work/life/balance.	Study was not such a culture shock to families, already had established high stocks of cultural capital.

3. Does the model of family capital, developed with FD women students, help us to understand the experiences of PD students?

- **FINANCIAL** – None of the PD students were financially driven, this seemed to be a natural part of their career, they weren't necessarily expecting a promotion or wage increase, whereas with FD learners none of them were in graduate jobs so the financial incentive was quite important.
- **EDUCATIONAL/HE BACKGROUND** – PD students had a family culture and ethos of education, many were already working in education, some had partners completing post graduate qualifications themselves. Therefore, cultural capital was very significant to PD students and an important factor in their success.
- **STRONG MARITAL RELATIONSHIP** - Strong relationships were important for both PD and FD students, the word pride was mentioned frequently but also there seemed to be a network of support already in place for PD students because of their busy careers.

Phase two – Children's perceptions of having a mummy who studies (initial analysis)

Picture analysis – Although every picture portrayed a negative view of children feeling sad because of a lack of time with their mother due to her studying (computers and mothers with their back to the children studying seemed to be a common theme) when children explained their pictures there were also themes of understanding, pride and resilience. The children were able to see beyond the image of their mother being busy and occupied in study to the wider picture of being able to spend additional time with their father or siblings, having more time to do their own activities and understanding the motivations of their mother to study.

- **Occupying time** – Children developed strategies to occupy their time whilst mothers were studying (playing on own, with siblings, with father, with a pet or extra screen time).
- **Feelings** – all children showed mixed feelings towards their mother studying although they strongly felt that they lost out on her time they realised why she was doing it (e.g. career progression, increased income etc.) and were supportive and some showed pride.
- **Benefits of studying to children** – raised aspirations, developed strategies of independence and problem solving, better relationships with siblings (conflict resolution).
- **Messages for mothers** – children were asked for messages to give new mothers. Themes included managing time (between family and study), not giving up, not worrying or feeling guilty as the children understood.

- **Messages for children** – children were asked for messages to give other children whose mothers were studying. Themes included finding activities to occupy themselves when their mother studied, not to keep interrupting the mother, giving mothers space and time to study, being prepared to play on their own or with siblings.

Associated publications:

Webber, L. (2017) 'Supporting professional doctorate women students through identity change and turbulent times: who cares?' *Pastoral Care in Education*. 35:3, 152-165.

Eprints link: <http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/emiudNzptEGzrkB6sVUU/full>

Intended publications:

- **Mummies that study project** – I would like to write up my findings to be published in the Research in Post Compulsory Education or Pastoral Care journal.
- **Mature women and the EdD: changing identity and family relationships** – I would like to write an article comparing Foundation Degree and Professional doctorate mothers' experiences of juggling Higher Education study and family life.

Dissemination:

Conferences

- Mature Learners in Further and Higher Education: a symposium, Plymouth University, June 2017, *'Juggling Higher Education Studies and Family Life'*.
- Petroc Scholarly Activity Conference, Barnstaple College, June 2017, *'Juggling Higher Education Studies and Family Life'*.
- SRHE Conference for Newer and Early Career Researchers, Celtic Manor Hotel, Wales, December 2016, *'Women and Professional Doctorates: Changing professional identity and family relationships'*.

Planned conferences

- SRHE Conference for Newer and Early Career Researchers, Coldra Court Hotel, Wales, December 2017, *'My mummy studies' – An investigation into the effects of higher education study on family life'*. (Poster presentation)